



# What to expect: Climate disinformation ahead of COP27

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The year's most important international climate talks are fast approaching, and the fossil fuel industry and its right-wing media allies are seizing the opportunity to ramp up climate disinformation and delay climate action.

The 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) will be held in Egypt from November 6-18, bringing together politicians and delegates from nearly 200 countries to set goals and present plans for addressing climate change and report on their countries' current progress toward achieving these goals.

In the months leading up to COP27, statements from right-wing media figures suggest that misinformation about transitioning to clean energy will play a large part in this year's campaign to undermine the conference both in the U.S. and around the world. International events that aim in part to address the climate crisis, such as Davos and the United Nations' Conference of Parties, often fuel conspiracy theories claiming that climate change is a crisis fabricated by international institutions like the World Economic Forum and the United Nations. This cycle of false claims, misinformation, and conspiracy theories gives right-wing media and other bad actors ammunition for attacks on climate policies and leaders affiliated with these intergovernmental organizations, further weaving the climate discourse into broader culture wars.

Here are just some of the ways right-wing media and fossil fuel industry shills can be expected to undermine the case for climate action around COP27.

## **Fossil fuel industry-aligned media will insist that oil and gas expansion is necessary in light of Europe's energy crisis and the war in Ukraine**

One of the biggest concerns climate advocates have about COP27 is that geopolitical tensions resulting from the Russian war in Ukraine will decrease momentum for cooperation on climate goals, and right-wing media will likely exploit these tensions.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in late February, conservatives have exploited the war to reinforce the idea that U.S. energy independence only comes from more oil and gas drilling. The rising costs of food and energy in the wake of Russia's attack have also created fodder for far-right conspiracy theories such as the "Great Reset," which contends that these challenges are the result of a tyrannical one-world government or "globalist cabal" using emergencies such as COVID-19 and climate change in order to take away people's personal freedoms. Right-wing media and

politicians across the globe have blamed “the rush to ‘net zero’” emissions for the latest energy crisis, and they will likely continue to push this misleading point during COP27 to discourage steps to aggressively implement clean energy targets.

In reality, the International Energy Agency’s annual world energy outlook found that the global energy crisis has likely hastened the transition away from fossil fuels — the agency predicted that because of a massive increase in the deployment of renewables, demand for fossil fuels will peak in 2025, sooner than anticipated. The report also found “scant evidence to support claims from some quarters that climate policies and net zero commitments contributed to the run-up in energy prices.”

Despite this, right-wing media figures are claiming that the European energy crisis has permanently deterred countries from meeting their climate goals. Fox News commentator and longtime climate denier Steve Milloy insisted on October 24 that “after 34 years of climate idiocy, ahead of #COP27 and ahead of World War III, coal burning is at a record (as are prices). Emissions are never going down and the climate agenda is dead.”

Climate contrarians Jordan Peterson, Michael Shellenberger, and Alex Epstein were recently identified as key amplifiers in a report looking at climate disinformation around COP26, and they have already started taking aim at issues that will be central to COP27.

Peterson wrote in The Telegraph in August that the net zero “agenda, justified by emergency, will instead make everyone poorer, particularly those who are already poor,” in addition to making “the lives of the working men upon whom we all depend for our daily bread and shelter more difficult and less rewarding.” He concluded, “There is simply no pathway forward to the green and equitable utopia that necessitates the further impoverishment of the already poor.”

In a September 27 Facebook post, Peterson claimed that “globalist utopians demand that we fall in line with their ‘cure’ for climate change,” which he also suggested was to blame for the European energy crisis.

On Twitter, Shellenberger has acknowledged that the European energy crisis began after Russia “started curtailing nat gas as retaliation for EU sanctions & its military support for Ukraine” but insisted that “the underlying reason is Germany's delusional belief that it could rely on renewables.”

Epstein similarly claimed in September that increasing oil and gas production is the real solution “to help ourselves and our allies” facing an “energy crisis—specifically a crisis of lack of fossil fuel supply, which has increased the cost of energy and increased Europe’s dependence on Russia.”

### **Right-wing media will misleadingly use large developing countries' energy policies to delegitimize climate action elsewhere**

Right-wing media have long argued that because countries like China and India have large carbon footprints as they continue to expand and industrialize using the dirtiest energy sources, such as coal, it would be futile for the U.S. and other countries to transition to cleaner forms of

energy. If right-wing media follow their past playbook in covering COP27, any commitments that large developing countries do or do not make are likely to be weaponized against climate action.

At COP26, countries including Saudi Arabia, South Africa, China, and India sought to water down language in the final agreement to avoid eliminating fossil fuel subsidies and completely phasing out coal. Without the cooperation of these governments, it would indeed be nearly impossible to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. As a new U.N. report warned, even if countries follow through with climate commitments, the world would be on track for at least 2.5 C of warming. However, this cynical thinking that discounts any and all progress and ignores the fact that every bit of warming governments are able to prevent will save lives, particularly those who have barely contributed to the climate crisis yet are disproportionately affected by its harmful impacts.

On Facebook, climate denier and conspiracy theorist Glenn Beck posted a video on October 24 claiming that the Inflation Reduction Act — which includes more than \$360 billion in spending to address climate change — really “isn’t about the climate” because China's new plan to increase coal production “would wipe out any gains from Biden's climate plan multiple times over.” (Though China is expanding coal production, the country is also making massive investments in renewable energy, expanding its solar capacity, and is predicted to overachieve the emissions reductions targets it promised internationally for 2030.)

In August, avid fossil fuel shill Daniel Turner wrote on Twitter: “Spending \$369 billion on climate initiatives won't stop China from emitting more emissions than the entire developed world combined.”

Republican operative, QAnon conspiracy theorist, and anti-Muslim extremist Scott Presler said on September 18, “The ‘green movement is a scam & democrats need to realize that — so long as we’re doing business w/ China — they’re funding climate change.”

Writing for the New York Post, climate skeptic Bjorn Lomborg on the other hand applauded China, India, and other developing countries for “balking at the expectation they emulate these terrible policies” aiming for net-zero emissions.

### **Climate contrarians will frame fossil fuel expansion as the only viable option to address energy poverty in developing nations**

The African Union, which represents 55 member states, reportedly plans to use COP27 to push for fossil fuel expansion. Right-wing media will misleadingly frame massive oil and gas expansion as the only viable solution for people in African nations who are suffering from energy poverty, famine, and drought, driven in part by climate change.

To be sure, criticism that the West is hypocritical in its climate policies is warranted: Rich nations have yet to fully deliver on their promise of \$100 billion in mitigation and adaptation funds for developing nations annually that were set to begin in 2020. Now, Europe is rushing to buy natural gas from Africa in place of Russia, and some energy-producing African countries are questioning why they can’t expand and directly benefit from these resources when

rich countries haven't delivered on promises to help finance green projects that could replace fossil fuels.

However, those who back fossil fuel expansion have made the astonishing claim that green energy policies themselves are the true source of oppression in the Global South and the main obstacle keeping poor nations in poverty.

Michael Shellenberger, who is known for bashing renewable energy, recently took to Twitter to back coal production in South Africa in response to supposed climate hypocrisy from Germany. Last year, Germany gave roughly \$810 million in an agreement to help South Africa end its use of coal, a move Shellenberger decried as “green imperialism.”

On September 13, former Trump appointee Ryan Maue, who has previous ties to the Koch-funded Cato Institute, said, “China lifted a billion people out of poverty through industrialization powered by fossil fuels. India is doing the same. Why can't Africa?”

“At this point in history, any nation, organization, or person standing in the way of another impoverished nation seeking to develop its own natural resources like oil, gas, and coal in the name of climate change deserves a special place in hell,” Maue added, concluding that “Western enviro groups involved in these efforts are pure evil.”

A September 29, Western Journal op-ed claimed that “for those in the Third World, colonialism is a living experience, courtesy of restrictive energy policies forced upon them by Western political leaders.”

"This modern form of enslavement — to the West's so-called green agenda — is variously known as climate colonialism, carbon imperialism and other monikers. Whatever the nomenclature, the reality is suppression of access to fossil fuel energy sources in the name of saving the planet from a made-up climate emergency."

The anti-science agenda driving this stance is clear: The author, Vijay Jayaraj, also writes for the CO2 Coalition, an organization dedicated to climate change denial.

### **Right-wing media will use claims of climate hypocrisy and elitism to dismiss the urgency of climate action**

Right-wing media frequently and inaccurately label wealthy, privileged people as representatives of the entire climate movement, attacking their supposed hypocrisy based on their individual actions in order to help oil and gas companies shirk responsibility for hindering climate action and extending the world's reliance on fossil fuels. (Climate advocates have repeatedly condemned the not-so-climate-friendly methods of travel adopted by politicians and celebrities.) With leaders arriving from around the world, attacks can be expected to ramp up around international climate conferences to distract media consumers from negotiations.

Conservative British political commentator Sophie Corcoran recently noted on Twitter that the COP27 summit is “where all of the world leaders are going to fly over to Egypt in their private jets, in order to tell us that we should stop flying. Can't wait.”

The Washington Examiner claimed in a recent editorial that politicians “do not believe a word they say about climate change,” but “they are dead serious about you sacrificing your lifestyle.” The piece smeared “climate hypocrites” who “are the very same ones maximizing their own carbon footprints by flying on private jets.”

U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry has been a frequent target of such attacks from right-wing media. “U.S. climate envoy John Kerry warned African nations last week not to rely too heavily on natural gas in their efforts to modernize and bring electricity to millions,” said a September FoxNews.com article. “Federal data obtained by Fox News in July showed that Kerry’s family jet had emitted 300 metric tons of carbon dioxide since the Biden administration began.”

### **How to combat climate disinformation related to COP27**

A new report from the Climate Action Against Disinformation Coalition aims to help journalists respond to and disarm misleading claims about energy and climate change.

The report highlights the importance of avoiding elevating bad content and repeating manipulative language and provides journalists and advocates with guidance for thinking about when to strategically ignore disinformation, when to simply provide accurate information, and when to debunk. It is key to contextualize disinformation to expose the real intentions of the bad actors spreading it, as well as identify potentially discredited sources. Is the person who wrote this being bankrolled by the fossil fuel industry? Do they have a history of climate change denial? The report provides tons of helpful resources for that purpose, as well as a variety of case studies and toolkits that would also be helpful for anyone who wants to make sure their online communities are informed about climate change adaptation and mitigation.

If it were a country, the fossil fuel industry would have been the largest delegation at COP26, while climate activists from the Global South struggle to gain access to the talks. Disinformation and greenwashing have unfortunately become part and parcel of the climate talks, and COP27 will be no exception. Now is the time to push back on the falsehoods, conspiracy theories, and misinformation from the fossil fuel industry and its right-wing media allies seeking to influence this year’s conference.